



Fall 1979

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Recommended Citation

Gatton, John Spalding (1979) "'Mr. Clay & I got stung': Harriet Martineau in Lexington," *The Kentucky Review*: Vol. 1 : No. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review/vol1/iss1/5>

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Library Notes

"Mr. Clay & I got stung": Harriet Martineau in Lexington

by John Spalding Gatton

Prompted chiefly by her remarkable curiosity, the English author Harriet Martineau (1802-1876) sailed to the United States in 1834 "to witness the actual working of republican institutions."¹ This interest in American social conditions harmonized with her latest published works, which appeared in eighteen volumes (in three series) of stories on political economy, poor laws, and taxation. The tales, with international settings, illustrated economic abuses and inequalities, treated of current ameliorative theories, and showed Miss Martineau to be an ardent advocate of social reform.² Of especial value to her generation, and a principal source of her contemporary reputation in England, were her efforts to popularize through fiction the advanced thinking of the day. Malthus, Bulwer-Lytton, Carlyle, the Wordsworths, and Charlotte Brontë were her friends; cabinet ministers sought her opinion; in 1873 Gladstone, the Prime Minister, offered her a life-pension (which she refused).

Between 19 September 1834 and 1 August 1836, she journeyed through the Northern States, traversed the Deep South, and visited the Midwest, at a time when slavery was testing the country's fervent declaration that all men are created equal.³ The American publication of certain of her works had put Miss Martineau's name before the people, but her opposition to slavery, in particular, preceded her. As she commented in her *Autobiography* (1:335), "I . . . declared myself satisfied that slavery was indefensible, economically, socially, and morally. Every body who knew any thing about me at all, at home or in America, knew that from the spring of 1832 I was completely committed against slavery." She did not obtrude her opinions on this sensitive subject, but when asked for them, she spoke out frankly.

Despite, and often because of, her candor, she enjoyed a warm reception wherever she went; eminent citizens and vociferous critics

vied with one another to show her attention. Presidents, senators, judges, editors, writers—among them Andrew Jackson and James Madison, Webster and Calhoun, John Marshall, Garrison, Emerson—received the witty, curious traveler. To all Miss Martineau, deaf from the age of twenty, proffered her ear trumpet, either the conventional sort or an earpiece joined by a rubber tube to an ivory cup which, at gatherings, was passed among the speakers. She and her companion, Louisa Jeffrey, endured jolting horseback rides, confining stages, fetid canal boats, sooty trains, and unreliable steamboats. They frequently lodged in private homes of distinguished citizens. In Washington, D. C., they became acquainted with Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky (1777-1852), whom Miss Martineau captured in a vivid pen portrait: "Tall and thin, with a weather-beaten complexion, small grey eyes, which convey an idea of something more than his well-known sagacity,—even of slyness, . . . [having] something of the air of a divine, from his hair being combed straight back from his temples."⁴ Later, in her *Autobiography* (1:379), she claimed that Clay's "unworthy conduct during the closing years of his life [his resistance to the abolition of slavery] overthrew my esteem, and destroyed my regard for him"; but in 1835 she deemed the Senator "my personal friend." His son-in-law, James Erwin, escorted the ladies up the Mississippi from New Orleans aboard the *Henry Clay*, and afterwards, with his wife Anne Brown Clay Erwin, was their host in Lexington, Kentucky, for a three-week period from late May to mid-June 1835. Woodlands, the Erwins' farm where the family spent part of each year, adjoined Clay's estate, Ashland.⁵

Miss Martineau's hosts in Charleston, South Carolina, during the latter half of March had been the Reverend Samuel Gilman (1791-1858), a Unitarian minister and author, and his wife, Caroline Howard Gilman (1794-1888), also a writer. To them she addressed the following letter, penned on her thirty-third birthday, prior to her departure for Cincinnati:⁶

Lexington, June 12th [18]35.

Dear friends.

I find I have done foolishly in gratifying myself in my fancy of writing to you on my birthday. I longed to write immediately on receiving yours, but put off till today, & now, besides being pressed for time (as we leave at day break tomorrow,) I can scribble but very badly, from the wild bees having taken liberties with my right hand & wrist. We cut down a bee tree yesterday evening, & Mr Clay & I got stung. Nobody else! What a pretty sight it is!⁷ Our young countryman, Murray, of whom you heard us speak as a Washington acquaintance, & a London one of mine, enjoyed it highly. He is son to Lord Dunmore, & nephew of 3 or 4 great Scotch dukes,⁸ & people here are delighted to find him running as wild as themselves in their beautiful woods. We have relished highly some English talk with him. He agrees with me that the new English ministry can't stand long. It is a compromising one; & these are not days for compromise.⁹

Well! What a treat your letters were! . . . Thank you too for your care of my good name. By the way, one had not need care much about that in some places one has to go to. Do you know Dr Caldwell of this place?¹⁰ He heard me saying something warm of Mrs Gilman the other day, & forthwith told me he was one of your most intimate friends. I am *sure* this cannot be true; & I have seen so much of his tendency to call himself the intimate friend of every one that is praised, & the dreaded enemy of any one that is blamed, that I am not at all sure that he knows you at all. However, he sends you his love, & bids me tell you that he praised you much to me! So very necessary that was!—He tells me that he is "never wrong about any thing": but he has been spreading all through Lexington such false & ridiculous accounts of some of my opinions, that the Erwins are quite angry, & we can none of us imagine what he means,—unless it be that he never *listens*, & so has to draw upon his imagination for the opinions of people whom he pretends to know. This does not signify in my case, because the Clays & Erwins know me, & find that we agree remarkably well; but it shows you that you need not be uneasy about my Charleston reputation, as I am liable to the same sort of misinterpretation elsewhere yet I feel truly obliged by your brotherly interest for me.—Mr Loring's letter gratified me very much, as far as I am myself concerned; & I accepted his invitation with eagerness:¹¹ but (may I say it?) I was grieved at some of his letter. His prejudice

against the Southerners appears to me very unreasonable. *You* know my detestation of slavery; but he will never persuade me that all the slave-holders, not daring to indict & imprison me, have been in a conspiracy to blind me by their hospitality &c &c. You will scarcely believe that he has written this, but so it stands in his letter. I am not, for this, the less disposed to give him credit for all that you say, & shall feel truly honoured if I should be the means of dispelling any degree of prejudice against his fellow-countrymen of the South. There will be ample choice of time for our visit to them, & they shall suit their own convenience.— . . .

I have not had the pleasure of speaking of you to Mr Clay, but, on the contrary, have carefully avoided your name. Why, do you think. Because his poor son is in a lunatic asylum,—driven there, they think, by the violence of his passions.¹² The second son is a sot, the third so jealous & irritable in his temper that there is no living with him; & the two lads, (fine boys of 17 & 13) give no great promise of steadiness. Mrs Erwin is all that they can desire in a daughter; but she is the only survivor of six daughters;¹³ Is it not melancholy? Mrs Erwin has talked to me of them all except the eldest, your pupil, whom she has never referred to.¹⁴ It is from her husband & his sister that I learned what, however, is pretty well known, I believe. But you will, of course, keep this mournful domestic history to yourselves. We have enjoyed our visit very much. It has been quiet, & full of country pleasures. I have been learning rifle-shooting, & have become acquainted with buffaloes & wild bees, as I told you.¹⁵ We have got volumes of intelligence from Mr Clay about all manner of American history & politics, & are delighted at the moderat[ion] & liberality of his views & language.¹⁶ . . . The state of religion is mournful, as far as I see. The Episcopalian minister (an Englishman) is mild & good, but narrow to a degree which will prevent his doing the gospel muc[h] real service.¹⁷ The presbyterian clergyman, (who is at the head of the fema[le] college which has made such a noise) seems almost perfectly ign[o]rant;¹⁸ & any thing so absolutely horrible as his last Sunday's sermon I never heard. I put down my trumpet, literally sick with his description of the tortures of the majority of the human race in hell, & God mocking their misery! He was perfectly cool himself, & indeed seemed to have some difficulty in reading his M.S. What lessons of hatred to teach from the pulpit! Again, I found, lying beside bible & prayer book in a young lady's chamber, a book against the catholics, so infamous that I don't believe the

most licentious novel could do her so much harm,—a new American publication!¹⁹ Again,—the Lexington people bicker so much that Mrs Erwin, who quarrels with nobody, hardly knows how to get on among them. I don't see how it should be otherwise where a religion of hatred is preached. My trust in in the glorious woods & stars, from whence a pure natural religion is as sure to be breathed forth & shed down as fragrance from the one & light from the other. God has his own methods of drawing us to him, however perverse we may be with him & with each other. Mr. Clark [sic], Unitarian minister from Louisville, is here today. He is full of hope from what has already been done there.²⁰ . . .

Pray remember us to enquiring friends, & give our love to the dear girls,²¹ & believe me ever your obliged & affectionate H. Martineau.

I found the Erwins delighted with the "Housekeeper," & they now are with the "Choir." How comes on the "Matron?"²²

A fortnight after her departure from Lexington, Harriet Martineau wrote to Henry Clay from White Sulphur Springs, Virginia: "We shall never forget how much we owe to yourself and very many of your friends to render our stay in this country happy. We shall always love Mr. and Mrs. Erwin like near and dear connections of our own. I hope Mrs. Clay and Mrs. Erwin are both better. Pray present our respects and love to all your circle, and believe me, dear sir, ever respectfully and gratefully your friend."²³

NOTES

¹She gave her reasons in *Society in America*, 2 vols. (New York and London: Saunders and Otley, 1837), 1:v, and in *Harriet Martineau's Autobiography, and Memorials*, ed. Maria Weston Chapman, 2 vols. (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1877), 1:330.

²The three series: *Illustrations of Political Economy*, *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated*, and *Illustrations of Taxation*. For excellent critical biographies, see Vera Wheatley, *The Life and Work of Harriet Martineau* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1957), and R. K. Webb, *Harriet Martineau: A Radical Victorian* (London: Heinemann, 1960).

³For a detailed itinerary, see *Society*, 1:vi-xi.

⁴Harriet Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel*, 2 vols. (London: Saunders and Otley; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1838), 1:173-179.

⁵Woodlands, razed about 1900-1902, stood at the head of Lexington's Park Avenue, on the present site of the municipal swimming pool in Woodland Park; see Clay Lancaster, *Ante Bellum Houses of the Bluegrass* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1961), pp. 52-53, and *Vestiges of the Venerable City* (Lexington: Lexington-Fayette County Historic Commission, 1978), pp. 33-36. Miss Martineau describes the house and grounds in *Society*, 1:201.

⁶The letter folds into an envelope, and in place of a stamp appears the phrase "Free H. Clay," in Clay's hand. As a United States Senator he enjoyed franking privileges. The manuscript (a signed holograph letter) is in the Special Collections Department, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky. The writer gratefully acknowledges the Department's permission to publish a slightly abridged version.

For purposes of clarity, certain of Miss Martineau's contractions have been silently expanded. Thus, *wh* becomes *which*, the participial *-ing* replaces *-g*, as in *sayg*, *saying*, and abbreviated place names are lengthened. Letters in brackets complete lacunae in the manuscript.

⁷Miss Martineau retailed her apian adventure at Ashland in *Society*, 1:203-205.

⁸Charles Augustus Murray, K. C. B. (1806-1895), the second son of George Murray, fifth Earl of Dunmore (1762-1836). Sir Charles numbered among his titled relations John Murray, fifth Duke of Atholl (1778-1846), James Murray, Baron Glenlyon (1782-1837), and William Murray, third Earl of Mansfield and eighth Viscount Stormont (1777-1840). Charles Augustus Murray recalled his Lexington visit with Harriet Martineau in *Travels in North America During the Years 1834, 1835, & 1836*, 2 vols. (London: Richard Bentley, 1839), 1:221-231.

⁹The Whig government formed by the new Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne, in April 1835. It remained in power until August 1841.

¹⁰Dr. Charles Caldwell (1772-1853), a founder (1819) of the Medical Department of Transylvania University, Lexington, and professor of medicine and clinical practice. From 1837 until his retirement in 1849, he taught at the Louisville Medical Institute.

¹¹The Boston lawyer and noted Abolitionist Ellis Gray Loring (1803-1858) invited Miss Martineau to be his family's guest in Boston, on the suggestion of his brother-in-law, Rev. Gilman. Loring's letter and her reply from Lexington are in *Memorials*, in Martineau, *Autobiography*, 2:253-256.

¹²Theodore Wythe Clay (1802-1870), the eldest of Henry and Lucretia Hart Clays' five sons, received, when young, a blow which fractured his skull. According to family tradition, this injury caused the growing fits of moroseness and wild behavior that so worried his parents. By 1831 his condition had developed into violent insanity, necessitating his confinement in Lexington's Asylum. He made occasional visits to Ashland, but lived his last forty years at the Asylum.

Thomas Hart Clay (1803-1871), the second son, was given to intemperate excesses and was jailed for a time in Philadelphia during the winter of 1828-1829. President Lincoln appointed him Minister Resident, first to Nicaragua (1862), then to Honduras (1863-1868).

A former lawyer, Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Clay, Jr. (1811-1847) was killed in the Mexican War at Buena Vista, Mexico, while leading the Second Regiment of Kentucky Volunteer Infantry. The "fine boys of 17 & 13" were James Brown Clay (1817-1864) and John Morrison Clay (1821-1887). James adopted a legal career, acted as *chargé d'affaires* to Lisbon (1849-1850), served in Congress (1857-1859), and was a member of the Peace Convention (1861). At the age of twenty-four, John showed signs of mental illness which led to a brief stay in the Lexington Asylum. He later became a farmer and horse breeder.

¹³In addition to Anne Brown Clay Erwin (born 1807), the Clay's daughters were: Henrietta (1800-1801), Susan Hart (1805-1825; died of yellow fever in New Orleans), Lucretia (1809-1823; died at Ashland of a severe cold), Eliza (1813-1825; died less than a month before Susan of a fever in Lebanon, Ohio, while accompanying her parents to Washington, D. C.), and Laura (died at three months of whooping cough, December 1816, in Washington, D. C.). Mrs. Erwin died in childbirth in December 1835.

¹⁴Samuel Gilman had acted as tutor in mathematics at Harvard from 1817 to 1819, Theodore Wythe Clay being one of his students.

¹⁵Miss Martineau recounted her morning lesson in rifle-shooting and the afternoon drive to see Robert Wickliffe's herd of buffaloes in *Society*, 1:201-203. Wickliffe outlined the history of his experiments in the raising, training, and crossbreeding of buffaloes in a letter of 1834 from Lexington to John James Audubon, reprinted in J. J. Audubon and Rev. John Bachman, *The Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America*, 3 vols. (New York: V. G. Audubon, 1851), 2:51-54.

¹⁶"Mr. Clay . . . spent part of every day" with the Erwins and Miss Martineau; for their topics of discussion, see Martineau, *Autobiography*, 1:343-344, 379, and *Retrospect*, 1:177.

¹⁷Rev. Henry Caswall (1810-1870), a native of Yateley, Hampshire, England, served as assistant rector at Christ Church, Lexington, and held the position of professor of Sacred Literature at the city's seminary.

¹⁸Probably Rev. Isaac Van Doren (1773-1864), a member of the West Lexington Presbytery, and the principal of Van Doren Collegiate Institute for Young Ladies, Lexington, from 1832 to 1838. The "noise" made by the college may have concerned the contemporary religious conflict between Old School and New School. The former represented the conservative, generally pro-slavery branch of Presbyterianism, while the latter united the Church's more evangelical, anti-slavery congregations.

¹⁹Ray Allen Billington lists many such works in "Tentative Bibliography of Anti-Catholic Propaganda in the United States (1800-1860)," *Catholic Historical Review* 18, no. 4 (January 1933):492-513. Miss Martineau elaborated on this incident in *Society*, 2:322.

²⁰Rev. James Freeman Clarke (1810-1888), early Transcendentalist, author, and editor of the *Western Messenger*. For his candid comments on this meeting with Miss Martineau, see John Wesley Thomas, ed., "The Letters of James Freeman Clarke to Margaret Fuller," *Britannica et Americana* 2 (1957):95-97.

²¹The Gilmans' daughters, Abby Louisa (1820-1873), the writer

Caroline Howard (1823-1877), Eliza Webb (born 1825), and Anna Margaret (born 1828). Maria Dupont (born 1831) died in infancy, as did two sons, Charles Lowell (born 1826) and Frederic Samuel (born 1839).

²². Among Mrs. Gilman's works are *Recollections of a Housekeeper* (1834) and *Recollections of a Southern Matron* (1836). Rev. Gilman published *Memoirs of a New England Village Choir* in 1829.

²³. *The Private Correspondence of Henry Clay*, ed. Calvin Colton (Cincinnati: H. W. Derby, 1856), p. 391.